

THE
EBOR
LECTURES



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Thursday 5th September 2013

'Am I my borther's keeper? Free enterprise, democracy and our moral obligation to the poor.'

The Morality of Austerity

It's good to be here. At my age it's good to be anywhere! I was telling my friend over here that I've reached that old age that when I go to a wedding the bride's grandmother looks better to me than the bride! You know you're getting old when that happens. I said to my mother: *Every time I get up to speak I get nervous.* She said: *Every time you get up to speak God gets nervous!*

I'm going to be talking about the Red Letter Christian movement and its relationship to poverty.

The Red Letter Christian movement began when certain Evangelicals in the United States felt that they no longer wanted to be identified as Evangelicals. Not because their theology had changed. But in the United States the Evangelical movement has become wedded to a particular brand of politics - very, very right wing politics. A marriage almost between the Tea Party and the Evangelical Community. We are not people who want to put down women; we are not anti-gay; we are not pro-war; we are not anti-environmentalist; we are people who are committed to a progressive agenda.

The name Red Letter Christians was given to us by a secular, Jewish, Country and Western Disc Jockey in Nashville, Tennessee. He began to refer to one of us, Jim Wallis, who is well known on this side of the pond, as those people who are into the Red Letters of the Bible - you know the old Bibles had the words highlighted in red and we decided to accept that particular title. Richard Waugh, a rather prominent Franciscan, said the difference between you Evangelicals and we Franciscans is obvious - you people get what you call saved and then you go to bible studies but every bible study you go to seems to be in one of Paul's Epistles. You study Ephesians, Galatians, Philippians, 1st and 2nd Thessalonians. I mean you are into the Epistles. If you ever do get around to reading the Apostles, you always see Jesus through the grid of Pauline theology - Jesus has to fit in with Paul. We Franciscans, on the other hand, when we come to know Christ we get steeped in the Gospels and we become so well acquainted with the Gospels that when we do get around to reading the Pauline Epistles we always see Paul through the grid of Jesus - not that there is a contradiction, but there is a different emphasis. If you want to know about justification by faith, you have to go to the epistles. Paul talks about things like justification by Faith, saved by grace through faith not works, lest any man or woman should boast - these things are in the epistles.

Your theology as a Christian comes from Pauline writings, whereas Jesus isn't so much the Theologian as he is the Prophet who declares a new era.

I often ask my students: "Why did Jesus come into the world?" I get a variety of good answers: He came to seek and save the lost; he came to reveal God; He came to give expression to what it means to be a fully actualised Human Being; he came to deliver us from Death and give us eternal life; and so it goes on. Very seldom do they answer the question as I know Jesus would answer it - there's a strong statement - I know how Jesus would answer the question. In Matthew, Mark and Luke he initiates his ministry by simply saying: "I have come to declare that the Kingdom of God is at hand". Jesus came to declare a new kingdom. The kingdom is described throughout the entire Old Testament, the Hebrew bible; and when he spoke, he spoke to a people who understood that image of the Kingdom.

I will cite one passage that I like more than any other. It comes from the 65th chapter of Isaiah, starting at the 17th verse:

And the Kingdom of God, when it comes, (Jesus knew this passage), will be characterised by these things: first of all children will not die in infancy - 23,000 children every day, die of either starvation or diseases related to malnutrition - when the kingdom comes that will not happen anymore. It goes on to say that: old people will live out their lives in health and wellbeing, and that the man that dies at 100 will be considered cursed having died so young. It goes on to add that: children will not be born to calamity - that means they will not be seduced by drug dealers on city corners; girls will not be getting pregnant at 13 or 14, not knowing what to do with the rest of their lives - no more will children be born through calamities. And it says this: when the kingdom comes people will build houses and they will live in them - in short, everyone will have a good house to live in, good housing for the poor. Everyone will have a job in the vineyard and each will receive fair payment for his labour, not someone else getting the profit. It says that in the scripture.

In other words there won't be sweatshops in Thailand producing sneakers and T-shirts and clothing, with workers paid 2 dollars an hour, while huge profits are made by the merchants in between them and the buyers. No more will that happen. The workers will get a fair income from their labour.

It goes on to say this: that the lion and the lamb will lie down together. Peace will pervade the planet. And then this: neither shall they hurt the Earth anymore. Environmentalism! This is not pie in the sky when you die. When Jesus came he came to declare a Kingdom in this world. When he taught the Lord's prayer, he taught us to pray: Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name, Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done - where? This is obviously not a Pentecostal gathering (laughter). Let's try that again: Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done - where? ("**Earth**" is shouted). There it is - on Earth! It's a very important thing - this world thing. I'm not denying Heaven, I believe in Heaven, at my age it's very important



to believe in Heaven!

I belong to an African/American Church very different from the York Minster - they told me to speak slowly! Not in my Church. And we take Heaven very seriously. I remember the first time I went to an African/American funeral - I'm the only white member left in this 2000 member Church and it was wonderful. I had never been to an African/American funeral before. It was fun! The Minister spent 20 minutes describing life after death and, I want to tell you people, he made it sound so wonderful that halfway through his sermon I wished I was dead! Then he came down and spoke to the family words of comfort - beautifully done. And last of all, he went over to the open casket and for the last 20 minutes he preached to the corpse. You say, *what's that like?* Ask your priest, he'll tell you! He just yelled: "Clarence! Clarence!" Let me tell you people, he said it with such authority I would not have been surprised had Clarence answered. He said: "Clarence there were a lot of things we should have said to you, we should have thanked you for. But you got away too quickly Clarence, we got to thank you now." And he went down this litany of beautiful, wonderful things that Clarence had done for people. And when he finished, he said "Well that's it Clarence, there's nothing more to say; and when there's nothing more to say, there's only one thing to say". Now don't try this - you're right it won't work! He grabbed the lid of the casket and yelled at the corpse "Good night Clarence!" And he slammed the thing shut. Shock waves went over the congregation and as he lifted his head there was a smile on his face, and he said "Goodnight Clarence. Goodnight Clarence, cos I know that God is going to give you a good morning." And the choir stood and sang: "On that great getting-up morning, we shall rise, we shall rise." And people were on their feet, and they were dancing in the aisles, and we were hugging each other. And I knew I was in the right Church - a church that takes death and turns it into a celebration, that is, the Church of Jesus Christ. I knew I was in the right place.

I don't want to minimise that other worldly stuff, but the primary message of Jesus was for this world. He wanted to create a people. That's what the Church is, a people: a people through whom he could work to change the political, social, economic institutions, all the institutions of society; a Church that would change people and change the world. For that's what the Kingdom is - it's a transformed world inhabited by transformed people. If mainline denominations got the last part right, they sometimes forgot that individuals had to be transformed. On the other hand Evangelicals were very good at talking about the transformation of individuals but didn't pay much attention to political, social and economic structures. We need both of those do we not? Transformed people living in a transformed world!

When we come to the kind of Kingdom that God wants to create through people like you me, that's what the Church is - a movement of transformers. Go to the 1st chapter of Ephesians where it says: "And he shall bring under himself, into subjection of himself,

all principalities all powers, all dominions, all thrones - through the Church we're in!" Whatever you can say about the Church, it is still God's primary instrument for affecting change; and if there is going to be the kind of changes that God wants to be made in this world, then the Church has to stand up and assume the responsibility that has been assigned to it. We're it! We're the instrument!

But Jesus goes on to say to us as individuals (and this is important because even though God comes to change us as individuals) that he does not call us to individualism, which is an ideology that has become so prevalent in my country and in your country that we have forgotten that there are people around us who we are connected to.

I was given some instructions when I took on this assignment. They said, we are dealing with the question: *Am I my brother's keeper?* My answer to that is: No, you're not! You're not your brother's keeper! You're your brother's brother! It is not a paternalistic thing that we are preaching here; it is a camaraderie in the Holy Spirit and it begins in a spiritual way.

Over the last few years I have been very, very deeply moved by the writings of St Ignatius. I've studied again the spiritual exercises, and I've learned new ways of praying. I used to pray Baptist - that's what I am. You don't have to be Baptist to go to Heaven, but why are you taking a chance?! Baptists just read off lists of non-negotiable demands to the Almighty, and they call it prayer; telling God a lot of things that God already knows. *Dear Lord, sister Mary is sick in the Hospital.* What do you think God is saying: "Whoa! I didn't know that, which hospital?" God knows what you have need of, before you even ask.

I still make my requests known to God. But sometimes I wonder whether our prayer life has not progressed beyond my son at the age of 7, who came into the living room and said: "I'm going to bed, I'm going to be praying. Anybody want anything?!" And you began to be aware that his theology of prayer needed some lifting. I wake up in the morning and I pray a different way. One time Mother Teresa said to a question about prayer - the question being, *when you pray what do you say to God?* - she said, *I don't say anything I listen.* The interviewer said: *Alright, when you pray, what does God say to you?* She said, *God doesn't say anything, God listens.* And then she added: *If you don't understand that I can't explain it to you.*

I do understand the kind of praying where you say nothing, you hear nothing, but in quietude and in stillness you surrender to the invasion of the Holy Spirit. That's what I do in the morning. In the morning I don't ask God for anything, I just surrender. It's one thing to have your doctrine down pat and one should never minimise the importance of sound doctrine. But it is far more important that the Holy Spirit invades you; that the Christ, who went to



Calvary on your behalf, invades you, penetrates you, flows into you and transforms you from within. When Christians approach the problem of poverty, they do so for unique reasons. When the Holy Spirit invades and pervades the consciousness and the heart and the soul of an individual, that individual's heart is broken by the things that break the heart of Jesus.

At Eastern University - which is an Evangelical university, a Baptist school - I would often take my students to Haiti, the poorest country in the western hemisphere. The priest of Cité Soleil, labelled by most observers, "the worst slum in the world", got me and my students up at 6 in the morning and he asked us to follow him. It was a rainy, misty morning as we moved through these narrow paths that separated the shacks of Cité Soleil. The rain had fallen all night long, the paths were muddy and there was excrement and the stench and the garbage. It was repulsive and I can't describe for you, the stench. As we followed the Priest, out of the shacks came mothers holding in their arms the corpses of children who had died during the night. And we picked up the corpses of 17 dead children - there was a flu epidemic. When you have influenza in York people get sick, but when children are suffering from extreme malnutrition they don't get sick, they die. And we followed him out to a ditch at the edge of Cité Soleil and the mothers laid the corpses in the ditch. I stood on one side of the ditch with the priest. On the other side were the mothers crying and wailing hysterically and, behind them, men trying to stand stoic. And in the midst of them all were my students, and there was Josh, stood 6'8", 280 pounds. The word around our basketball league of the universities was that he was dangerous under the back boards. He didn't look dangerous that day. Tears were streaming down his cheeks, his fists were clenched at his side, his chin was trembling. And I knew something; I knew he would never be the same. His heart had been broken by the things that break the heart of Jesus.

When Christ invades, that's what happens; and poverty is no longer just a sociological problem - it becomes individualised, existentially, as you meet those who are the victims of poverty. Not only is your heart broken, but this revolutionary movement that's going to transform the social institutions of the system is further encouraged; because when you're filled with God's spirit you cannot look into the eyes of those who suffer without having this eerie sensation that Jesus is staring back at you, staring back at you. I was walking down Chester Street in Philadelphia. A homeless man - a filthy, dirty, homeless man with a greasy beard that went off in all directions - was staggering towards me. He was yelling at somebody who wasn't even there. You've seen such persons, schizophrenic I'm sure, and he spotted me. And he said: *Hey mister, do you want some of my coffee?* I really didn't want any of his coffee - that Styrofoam cup was smudged with dirt off his beard - but I knew that the right thing to do was to affirm his generosity, so I took the cup, I took a sip, I gave it back to him and I said, getting generous: *Giving away your coffee to people you don't even know, giving away your coffee to strangers. What's gotten into you today? What's gotten into you today, fella?* He said: *Well, the coffee today was especially delicious and I figure if God gives you something good, you ought to share it with people!*



I thought: oh no, this guy has set me up, it's going to cost me 10 dollars! I said: *You want something from me in return don't you?* He said: *Yes, I want a hug!* I was hoping for the 10 dollars! But he put his arms around me and I put my arms around him, and then I realised something - he wasn't going to let me go! He had me in this bear hug. People were passing on the street, staring at me, hugging this dirty, homeless man. And I was embarrassed. But little by little, the embarrassment turned to awe and reverence, and I heard a voice, echoing down the corridors of time, saying: *I was hungry - did you feed me? I was naked - did you clothe me? I was sick - did you minister to me? I was a stranger... I was that derelict man on Chester Street - did you hug me?* For Jesus said: *In as much as you do it to the least of these you do it to me.*

The Christ who died on Calvary's tree to deliver us from sin, the one who resurrected himself to be the living lord of history, that same Christ chooses to incarnate himself in the poor and the oppressed. This is what keeps us from being mere pity givers. When we look into the eyes of the poor, if we see Jesus staring back at us, we will not feel superior. If we see Jesus staring back at us, we will not be condescending in our care for the poor. We will only ask one question: *Am I worthy?* It changes everything. The revolution which Jesus came into the world to initiate, begins when we are surrendered to him and he helps us to see him waiting to be loved in the other. Our approach to the poor is not simply sociological, it is intensely spiritual.

I was getting out of the van in Port au Prince, walking across the sidewalk to go into the Holiday Inn where I always stay. I was intercepted by three girls. The one in the middle said: *Mister, for 10 dollars you can have me all night long.* I was stunned. I looked at the one next to her. I said: *Do I get you for 10 dollars?* She said yes. I turned to the third one. She tried to look sexy - it's hard to be sexy when you're 17, your mother and father are dead, you have a brother and sister to support and you don't know how else to make any money. I said: *You're in luck I've got 30 dollars. I'm in room 210, you be up there in a half hour but not before.* I rushed up to the room, I called down to the concierge desk, and I said: *I want every Walt Disney video you've got in stock. Send them all to room 210.* I called down to the restaurant. I said: *Do you still make banana splits? I'll pay you extra, but I want extra ice cream, extra whipped cream, extra syrup, nuts, cherries. I want them huge. I... I want 4 of them!* And the girls came; and the videos came; and the banana splits came; and we sat on the edge of the bed until about 1 o'clock in the morning. And that's when the last of them fell asleep. And as I looked at their tired bodies strewn across the bed, as I sat on that stuffed chair, I thought (as I looked at them), nothing's changed, nothing's changed, tomorrow they'll be back on the streets. They'll be back selling their bodies to dirty, filthy men because there will always be dirty, mean, ugly men who for 10 dollars will destroy a little girl! Nothing's changed, I kept saying to myself and then these words came to me: *But for one night you let them be children again; for one night you gave them back their childhood; for one night you let them be kids. You did what you could.*

I challenge each of you that, when it comes to poverty, you will say that: *I can do what I can do.* That's what God expects. That each of you do what you can do on a personal level. Maybe it's supporting a child in a third world country through Catholic charities, or through World Vision or Compassion International - you know, £20 per month and you feed and clothe and educate and you deliver it all to a child in a third world country. I've heard the criticisms about it, but it does do good. I've seen the good.

The interesting thing is, we've made great progress in the Third World. I used to be able to say that while you were sleeping last night 45,000 children died of starvation or diseases related to malnutrition. It's down to 23,000 and I want to tell you who has been largely responsible for that movement. It's been the church of Jesus Christ. 25 years ago, one out of every six persons on this planet had no access to clean drinking water. Today, it's one out of twelve. The situation has improved 100% and I can tell you that when I travel around the world, I find church groups drilling wells for people in Third World countries. 25 years ago, 85% of the planet was illiterate. Today it's down to 20%. Again, guess who has had a heavy hand in this change?

I get tired with university students because I have to spend my life with them; because they're always complaining: *The Church is full of hypocrites!* Have you ever heard that? I always say: *That's why you're going to feel right at home among us!* You should come to my Church. The minute you walk in, you'll see us - a Church full of hypocrites - and you'll say *that's my kind of people!* That's what we are - hypocrites... with this caveat: we are hypocrites who are aware of our hypocrisies! We don't need to be told; we know them; and by the grace of God and the power of the Holy Spirit, we are striving to overcome those hypocrisies. As Paul writes so eloquently: *Not as though I have already attained, not as though I have already achieved, I'm still pressing towards the mark of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus, our Lord.*

The Church is one of the great success stories in history. My students who are secular humanists often have values that are even finer than many of my Christian friends but have also to recognise that those values were derived from the Church, a movement that has lost its religious moorings - you can argue that later on. But while things have gotten better in the Third World, they haven't gotten better in England, in Wales, in Scotland, in the United States. Poverty is on the increase - this is a sad state of affairs. Government action is necessary. Certainly it's necessary when it comes to dealing with the Third World. President Clinton was asked by the US Congress why is Haiti so poor? Huge amounts of money have been poured into Haiti. Missionary group after missionary group has gone to Haiti and yet things get worse and worse and worse. President Clinton answered the US Congress: *if I have to point the finger at anyone I will begin to point the finger at me. I was the strong advocate of free trade.*



Your country is a strong advocate of free trade. You say what's wrong with free trade? I mean, doesn't that mean that the goods coming from a Third World country, into the United States or into the United Kingdom, don't get taxed and vice versa - the goods we ship to those countries don't get taxed. Isn't it better for them that they not be taxed, and isn't it better for us that we not be taxed - it all sounds so wonderful. Until you realise that American Farmers are subsidised to the tune of \$18 billion a year, which means we can produce wheat and rice and ship it to Haiti and can put them on the market at a price that is lower than the rice and the wheat that is produced there. If you go to Haiti you will find a few rice farms left, but no wheat farms - we have driven them out of business. And now we are doing the same thing to South Africa - every month 100 farms close down. That policy may be good for American farmers; it's not good for the farmers in South Africa and the farmers in Haiti.

But let's get to your country. Following World War Two, this country went on a great experiment to become a welfare state in a very positive way. It was a time when the middle class began to grow at an incredible rate. There were reasons for it. The labour unions made sure to it that the labour was paid very well and every sociologist will tell you when the labour market, when the labour unions increase payment to the workers, it tends to bring along the wages of everybody else. In the United States, the auto workers were paid handsomely and it had the tendency to improve the wages paid to the people in every other walk of life. But General Motors, Ford Motors, these are no longer the great employers. It's Walmart. And Walmart pays minimum wage, provides no medical care for the workers, and the Harvard Business Review will tell you it has had the tendency to drag down the wages of everybody else in the society. It is what Talcott Parsons, the Sociologist would call a lead institution - it sets the tone. I would have to say - as Robert Reich, one of America's great economists has said - that the labour unions were a major factor in creating the middle class both in our country and in yours.

There are those who can point to the abuses of the labour unions and indeed there have been abuses. But God save us as those labour unions are beaten out of existence - the ramifications for the future are all too serious. In addition to that, there's outsourcing - not only of blue collar workers but also of white collar jobs. If you don't believe me check the label on your shirt. This country was the greatest producer of textile goods anywhere on the planet. You don't have anything left of it today. It's outsourced. You say, well it has created jobs in Third World countries at very low prices. You say there's no way of stopping that. Of course there is - through the UN or, in your case, the European Parliament. You could pass laws that would say that all products shipped into this country must be produced by workers who are paid a minimum wage. It doesn't have to be a great deal - £2 an hour. That doesn't sound like much to you, but what a difference it would make in the Third World. And it would also give a boom to workers here in this country and in my country, if they were able to compete with labourers in other countries. I believe in fair competition but it's not fair, what we have in our societal system today.



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